





LUCY STRANGE

THE
SECRET OF
NIGHTINGALE
WOOD

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“Do I wake or sleep?”

John Keats, *“Ode to a Nightingale”*

For my parents, Mary and Rick Strange

“Life is a splendid gift—there is nothing small about it.”

Florence Nightingale



1

We stood together, looking up at the new house—Father, Mama, Nanny Jane, Piglet, and me. It was large and old, almost falling down in places, with gently bulging walls and a steep, tiled roof that was etched with lichen. The sign on the gatepost read HOPE HOUSE.

“It’s a fresh start,” Father said.

Mama didn’t say anything. She just stared at our strange new home, and then turned to stare at Father.

“Come on, Piglet,” I whispered to the baby. “Let’s have a look around.”

I clutched her tightly to my chest and walked around the side of the house, toward the long garden and the wilderness of woodland that lay beyond.

“Don’t be long,” Nanny Jane called after me. “Be back for tea in twenty minutes please, Henry.”

I had always been Henry, even though my full name was Henrietta Georgina Abbott. Maybe my parents had wanted two boys. Now that my brother, Robert, had gone, they had two girls. Just me and Piglet.

Piglet wasn’t the baby’s real name either, of course. She had arrived during that terrible time last summer. Mama wouldn’t discuss what to call her, so Father had registered her as Roberta Abbott—a horrible mistake, but it was too late now. No one could bear to call her Roberta, so we called her Piglet because, well, she looked a lot like a baby pig. I liked the name because it reminded me of the baby in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

I felt a lot like Alice that day, exploring a new world in which nothing quite made sense. Piglet and I wandered past a disheveled herb garden, an overgrown bed of rose-bushes, and a broken old gazebo, all the way down the length of the lawn to the point at which the garden ended and the forest began.

Beneath the trees it was cool, dark, and badgery. It had been a hot summer, and the leaves and twigs beneath my feet were as crisp as kindling. A tangle of overgrown pathways wound away into the darkness of the forest. I stopped and listened, but I could only hear the soft thrum of my own heartbeat and the whisper of Piglet’s

breathing. She suddenly felt heavy in my arms and I realized she had fallen asleep. I kissed the top of her fluffy round head. “Funny little Piglet,” I whispered.

I stepped forward onto the nearest path, and then stopped. *What if I get lost and can't find my way back?* I thought. *What if the shadows of the forest swallow me up?* The branches above shivered strangely, and then, quite suddenly, I could smell smoke.

Smoke. That thick, bitter smell that filled my nightmares.

I turned and stumbled out of the trees, gripping the baby so tightly that she jolted awake and cried out. I patted her and tried to laugh, pretending my clumsy panic had just been a game. “It’s all right,” I said. She whimpered, unconvinced.

I looked back into the forest and saw a wraith of smoke drifting toward me through the trees.

The sunlit leaves trembled with secrets.

That evening, I helped bathe Piglet, and then I read to her as she fussed in her crib, squirming and babbling. She liked being read to, or at least she liked trying to chew the corners of the book. I stroked her little turned-up nose with my fingertip, and by the time I got to the final verse of “The Owl and the Pussy-Cat,” her eyes were starting to close.

*They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon . . .*

“Night night, Piglet,” I said, and tucked the blanket around her plump middle. And then I said, “Runcible,” because it was a lovely word and I didn’t know if it was real or not. I closed the nursery door softly behind me and went downstairs for supper.

Nanny Jane and I sat at the dining table for nearly ten minutes before Father joined us. We heard his raised voice upstairs, and then a door slammed shut. The old house shook and I half expected to hear Piglet’s cries drifting down the stairs, but she didn’t wake up.

Nanny Jane stirred her cooling soup and waited patiently—a vision of control, with her immaculate white apron and her hair pulled back into a perfect blonde bun. I asked her if she knew whether or not *runcible* was a real word and she said she wasn’t sure. I said I would ask Father.

“Not this evening, Henry,” she said.

When Father sat down he started eating his tepid soup immediately, without a word to either of us.

“Will Mama be coming down for supper?” I asked.

Nanny Jane shot me one of her looks.

Father swallowed his soup, touched his mouth with

his napkin, and took a deep breath. “I don’t think so, Henry,” he said. “Your mother is very tired.”

He suddenly looked very tired too and his eyes seemed to sparkle unnaturally, as if they had filled with tears. He looked down and rubbed his forehead.

I tried to think of something else to say.

“I think there might be someone in the woods,” I said. “When I was looking around this afternoon, I thought I could smell smoke . . .”

Father pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. “It has been a long day for all of us . . . And I’m not that hungry after all.”

He walked to the door.

“Perhaps give the stories a miss tonight,” he said, without looking back. “You’re too old for fairy tales now, Henry.”

I assumed Father had gone to bed, but I was wrong. After supper, I followed the smell of his pipe smoke to a study at the front of the house, just off the hallway. Bare wooden bookshelves lined each wall, from the parquet floor up to the high ceiling, so that it felt like an abandoned bookshop.

Father had begun to unpack a few boxes, but now he was just sitting in a high-backed armchair beside the empty fireplace, smoking his pipe. He must have heard

me come in, but he didn't say anything, so I didn't say anything either.

Books stood in neat piles on the floor, ready to be shelved. I picked up Father's heavy dictionary and flicked hopefully through the pages.

Runcible wasn't there.



2

That night I couldn't sleep.

I spent an hour or more sitting on the floor of my bedroom in my nightgown, unpacking my books from the traveling trunk and putting them on the bookshelf. I arranged them alphabetically: Louisa May Alcott, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens . . . Then I took them all off the shelf and started again, this time using the spines to create a rainbow of color—blue, green, gray, black . . .

I put my book of fairy tales on the bedside table; it didn't live with my other books. My brother, Robert, had given it to me for my twelfth birthday, very nearly a year ago. It was filled with the most beautiful pictures you could ever imagine—page after page of enchanted forests, underwater cities, and royal palaces. The longer you

looked at those pictures, the more you would see—there were pictures within the pictures, worlds within worlds.

My new bedroom was at the back of the house, overlooking the garden and the woods beyond. I opened the heavy curtains and stood at the dark window, but all I could see was my own reflection looking back at me.

There were dark circles under my eyes; my hair was a tangled brown mess. A year ago, Mama would have laughed and said, “You look like you’ve been dragged through a hedge by a runaway pony, Hen.” She would have pulled me toward her and gently brushed at the bird’s nest until my hair shone. She would have kissed me good night.

I blinked away the tears, and pulled the curtains together behind me to shut out the light.

The darkness beyond the window was vast and deep, nothing like the hazy gray of London at night. *This sky belongs in my book of fairy tales*, I thought. *An evil queen’s black velvet cloak, embroidered with diamonds . . .*

And then I saw the smoke.

It was drifting up in a thin wisp from the shadowy woods. As I squinted at it, I saw a tiny orange light flickering among the trees. A fire. *Someone has lit a fire in our forest.*

My heart clenched like a fist. I thought of all the dead leaves on the forest floor, the twigs as crisp as kindling. I imagined the fire growing and spreading, leaping up and

catching hold of the bone-dry branches above; I saw it tearing through the trees toward Hope House . . .

I stared and stared at the fire until my eyes burned, but it didn't grow or tear or leap. It glowed. It—*twinkled* . . .

I wanted to pretend I hadn't seen it, to put my night-dress on and cuddle down beneath the soft blue blanket with my book of fairy tales, but the brightness of the fire was somehow magical, magnetic, like a faery flame.

Without letting myself think about what I was doing, I put on my boots and dressing gown, and opened the bedroom door.

I stood on the landing and listened for Father's snores, but everything was quiet. I thought I had heard the engine of a motorcar earlier, and now, standing there in the darkness and silence, I felt a little jolt of panic—what if everyone had packed up and gone back to London without me? Then came the low, comforting murmur of an adult voice. Father. Perhaps he couldn't sleep either . . .

I made my way down the stairs, sticking to the edge of the staircase near the banister, where the wood was less likely to bend and creak beneath my feet. I imagined my brother Robert's voice whispering at me from the landing: "*You're supposed to be in bed, Henrietta . . .*" and my heart thudded guiltily. I wondered if Nanny Jane could tell if a child was wearing boots instead of slippers just from the sound of a creaking stair.

I crept through the hallway and into the kitchen. The table was piled with boxes of our things from London. They stood open, as though someone had started unpacking them and had been called away. I saw crystal wineglasses and a pretty set of dinnerware decorated with pink roses. I hadn't seen these things since the Christmas before last, and I didn't think it was likely that they would be used again very soon. Things weren't like that anymore in the Abbott family.

The door to the garden was locked. On the wall to the left of the door was a row of hooks, and each hook had a different key hanging from it. One had a little label attached with a loop of garden twine—KITCHEN DOOR. The key grated reluctantly in the lock and the door swung open.

With the faint light of the kitchen behind me, the garden was a dark greeny-gray—like the bottom of the ocean. I could just make out the shipwreck of the old gazebo drifting and creaking somewhere beyond the sprawling herb garden. In front of me there floated a few half-closed white roses; the rosebush itself was almost invisible in the gloom, so the flowers bobbed about like ghostly jellyfish. I found that I was holding my breath, as if I really were underwater. I forced myself to take a big gulp of air, and stepped onto the lawn.

As I walked through the garden, my shadow stretched ahead of me, toward the mysterious forest. It sat there darkly, like a thundercloud that had fallen from the sky. I

could smell a bonfire bitterness on the night air, and it made my heart thump. I told myself it wasn't a frightening smell at all; it smelled like autumn walks in Hyde Park—like fireworks, Halloween . . .

If Robert were here, I told myself, he wouldn't be afraid at all.

I stared into the dark mass of trees ahead, and my imagination ambushed me with nightmarish creatures—slavering wolves, whispering tree-demons, long-fingered witches . . . Every part of me was alive with fear now—my fingers, my skin, my lungs . . .

And then a sudden, desperate shriek pierced the night like a needle.

I froze. *An owl?* But it sounded almost human . . .

I turned back to look at the house—and stifled a scream.

Tall shadows were moving in an upstairs window. A crowd of twisted silhouettes—three people—no, four! Who on earth could it be, upstairs in our house so late at night? Father, Mama, Nanny Jane, and . . . *who else?* Another cry escaped from the window, the shadows danced in a flurry of movement, and then there was a longer scream. A pitiful wail.

It wasn't an owl.

It was Mama.